

rotary  
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exchange



# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE:

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) Exchange Students

# rotary youth exchange



The Rotary International Board of Directors reaffirmed that “Rotary values diversity and celebrates the contributions of people of all backgrounds, regardless of their age, ethnicity, race, color, abilities, religion, socioeconomic status, culture, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.”

We strive to “cultivate a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture in which people from underrepresented groups have greater opportunities to participate” in Rotary Youth Exchange.

The primary goals of Rotary Youth Exchange are providing young people the opportunity to not only experience an exchange, but to develop as leaders who promote peace and social justice around the world. For this to be achieved, everyone involved in the exchange — from students to volunteers — must be open-minded, tolerant, and supportive of one another.

Beliefs, customs, laws, and even terms related to gender identity and the LGBTQ+ community vary greatly around the world. Consequently, so may an LGBTQ+ student’s sense of safety and support during the course of an exchange. In an effort to help you support all students regardless of background, we have compiled some best practices to help you create the most inclusive, diverse, and supportive programs possible.



**READ MORE ABOUT ROTARY’S COMMITMENT  
TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION**

# UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE

LGBTQ+ students who make the decision to go abroad are often taking on an even bigger challenge than many other people their age. Not only are they taking the steps to immerse themselves in a new culture, but they have other personal factors to consider.

For example, students who have overcome the challenge of disclosing their sexual orientation (also known as coming out) in their home country potentially face coming out all over again. But on exchange, students are in an unfamiliar country and culture that may not be fully accepting or understanding of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Students who have not decided to come out may face additional pressures, including how they may be perceived by their new hosts or the threat of someone else disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is also not uncommon for a student to come out during the course of their exchange.



In addition to the stress and anxiety all students experience, LGBTQ+ students may be asking themselves additional questions when they decide to go abroad:

- Will my family find out I'm [insert sexual orientation or gender identity]?
- Will I be accepted?
- Will I be safe?
- Will I be able to express myself to others?
- Will I feel comfortable with my host family?
- Will they feel comfortable with me?
- Will I experience discrimination?
- Will I face additional dangers using public transit?
- Will I have any support from my host district?



Make an inclusive introduction:

- Hi! My name is \_\_\_ and I use [she, her, etc.] pronouns. What about you?
- What pronouns do you all use?
- Let's introduce ourselves! Tell us your name, your pronouns, and your favorite food!

## CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS

Whether it be on an application form, at a student interview, or at inbound or outbound orientations, create an environment that allows students to be themselves. In doing so, you are not only letting them know that you care about them, but you're fostering a safe, judgment-free space where students may feel comfortable enough to share things about themselves that could help you determine what specific support they'll need as participants of the program — however they identify.

- **Address LGBTQ+ topics with all students and volunteers.** Make it a practice to be inclusive regardless of the audience. You'll be supporting LGBTQ+ students while also building knowledge among peers, volunteers, and allies.
- **Be respectful of where LGBTQ+ students are in their journey.** Allow students to come out in their own time, if they decide to disclose their status at all. If students do come out to you, be sensitive to the fact that they may not be ready to come out to others, including their own family or sponsor district representatives.
- **Along those same lines, be aware of the potential for outing a student.** It is critical to support the wishes of the student and avoid outing them to fellow volunteers, host families, and students. Ultimately, it is their decision whether they wish to disclose something as personal as their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- **Understand how to use pronouns.** It's impossible to know the words a person uses to describe themselves or how they prefer to be described by others. Some pronouns are described as gendered (he/him, she/her) or gender-neutral (they/them). Asking and correctly using someone's preferred pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity. When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, or alienated.
- **Use gender-neutral language when possible.** Sometimes the best way to be inclusive is to avoid using gendered language, especially when you don't know someone's preferred pronouns. To be trans-sensitive with a group or one-on-one, try to use inclusive terms that don't require someone to fit into a narrow category. Examples include: "you all," and "they/them" instead of "you guys," "he or she," "him or her."
- **Allow people to self-identify.** Strive to create a welcome and open environment so that students feel comfortable coming forward — if they want to do so. Do not make assumptions. Instead, let students themselves tell you how they identify. At in-person meetings, try using nametags where students can indicate their preferred name and pronouns, or try introducing yourself by giving your pronouns first and allowing students to follow your example. And, if you make a mistake (and it happens), it's OK — just apologize and move forward.
- **Be honest about your knowledge (or lack thereof) of LGBTQ+ topics.** We all have varying levels of understanding, so it's OK if you don't have all the answers. And if you don't, let students know this and refer them to those who do.
- **Most importantly, be kind.** Regardless of our knowledge or experience of LGBTQ+ topics, when we are kind and open-minded, we create an opportunity for growth and move closer to our goal of a more tolerant and understanding world.



### Allow people to self-identify:

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- And, if you make a mistake (and it happens), it's OK — just apologize and move forward.



“Rotary Youth Exchange is about students adapting to and accepting a new environment. Transgender peoples’ transition is about others adapting to their [identity]. These two things can only coexist with great care, counseling, and support.”

— **Michael Parks** (Youth Exchange Officer, 2018-19) at the Diversity and Inclusion in Rotary Youth Exchange breakout session during the 2019 Youth Exchange Officers Preconvention event in Hamburg, Germany

## SPONSOR DISTRICT CONSIDERATIONS

As a sponsor district, you have the incredible responsibility of preparing your outbound students for the exchange and all the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Whether you are working with prospective Rotary Youth Exchange students and families or those who have already been accepted into the program, here are a few things to remember:

- **Allow students to make their own informed decisions.** Equipping students with resources to help them understand the cultural perspective toward LGBTQ+ people in a potential host community is essential. But don’t limit their list of possible host countries just because of how they may or may not identify. Instead, encourage students to *ask the right questions* that will help them decide which countries might be the best for them, based on their own goals and expectations.
- **Engage LGBTQ+ Rotary Youth Exchange alumni.** Not only are alumni valuable resources for our students, LGBTQ+ alumni in particular may be able to provide additional insight to students thinking about making the decision to go abroad.
- **Be open, honest, and transparent.** It is essential to be straightforward with students about the challenges they may face on exchange; in other words, don’t minimize or avoid certain details that may make the difference in understanding the reality of these challenges. Along those same lines, straightforward communication between district partners about a student’s needs is essential for a successful exchange. This sets everyone’s expectations from the start and can help ensure the right support is in place before a student leaves — potentially avoiding serious challenges for volunteers and your student later.

- **Discuss medical treatment and other essential needs.** Help students determine what their medical needs are and may be on exchange, and work with your partners to determine a placement that can provide them that care. Allow students to reflect about how their support structure, especially in terms of medical or mental health care, might differ from the one they have at home.
- **Ensure your students will have a strong support structure — at home and abroad.** Confirm that students will have the resources they need to successfully navigate the challenges of exchange. Talk to your student about their needs, and ask your partners questions about any and all aspects of the exchange that could impact the safety and well-being of your outbound student.
- **Develop an inclusive re-entry orientation.** Re-entry orientation should be as inclusive as the predeparture training. And remember: While all students will experience some form of reverse culture shock upon return, be sensitive to specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students. Just as they learn to navigate their identity abroad, they return home to the challenge of adjusting all over again.



### Ask the right questions

Help students understand the LGBTQ+ landscape of their host country by thinking about the following:

- What is the attitude toward gender in my host country?
- What are the typical gender roles in my host community?
- What are the perceptions and expectations for men, women, and transgender individuals in my host country?
- What are the stereotypes of my culture or home country in my host country?
- How do men treat women (and vice versa) in my host country?
- Are there differences in political and social power based on gender in my host country?
- How do my personal values compare with the predominant attitudes about socially-accepted gender roles in my host country?



Ask your host district partners:

- Will the student be placed in a school that is accepting?
- Is their host family accepting and open to supporting them?
- Will they be assigned a counselor who understands — or who is willing to understand — the unique challenges our LGBTQ+ students might face?

## HOST DISTRICT CONSIDERATIONS

As a host district, students and their families depend on you to provide support and care during the exchange. Here are some ways your district can do that:

- **Like sponsor districts, be open and honest.** Talk openly with your district partners and to students about the realities of their host environment — especially if there are any associated risks related to their safety. For example, in some countries, social attitudes toward an underrepresented group may differ from the law. Even if it doesn't reflect your personal beliefs, be honest about the cultural climate so that students can make an educated decision about choosing to travel to your country and adequately prepare for the year ahead.
- **Communicate with your inbound student in advance of their exchange.** Help ease students' fears by making it a point to communicate with them about their concerns before they depart. Whether it be the host family or host counselor who makes contact, make sure to establish a supportive relationship early on.
- **Choose your volunteers carefully — and then support them.** A successful exchange requires supporting your student; to do so, your volunteers, including host families, counselors, school staff, and others need to be fully supported, too. Connect them with local resources and fellow families who have experience hosting an LGBTQ+ student so that they, too, have a good support network in place.



- **Engage local organizations.** If possible, invite a local LGBTQ+ organization to speak at your orientations, and talk about local resources available to both students and volunteers during an exchange. And if possible, include an LGBTQ+ crisis hotline in the district's standard list of emergency contacts issued to students upon arrival.
- **Build a network of support around your students.** Connect host families to those with experience hosting LGBTQ+ students while also doing the same for your students: Invite LGBTQ+ alumni to your orientations, or have them serve as mentors to your inbounds. They can help students navigate the exchange and share knowledge about the climate of the local community.



### In their words

Alex had not yet come out to his family as transgender when he applied to be a Rotary Youth Exchange student in 2016 with District 6900, and was selected to go on exchange when he initially applied to the program as a girl. It was late during his preparatory year that Alex came out to his family and to his Rotary district officers as transgender and disclosed his intention to begin his transition while on exchange.

Like any exchange experience, Alex's year had its share of challenges; being a transgender exchange student requires even more resiliency, tolerance, and dedication. But Alex is living proof that with the proper communication, collaboration, planning, and dedication, a mature and well-adjusted transgender student can have an extraordinary experience with Rotary Youth Exchange.

— **Michael Parks**, District 6900 Youth Exchange Chair



Have a great idea, best practice, or story to share?  
Write to [youthexchange@rotary.org](mailto:youthexchange@rotary.org)  
and we may feature it in our next newsletter!



Check out the **PRESENTATION** on Diversity and Inclusion in Rotary Youth Exchange, from the 2019 Youth Exchange Officers Preconvention, for ideas on making the program inclusive for all. Click this box to see the presentation.

## RI RESOURCES

Based on the results of our recent annual survey, RI has identified districts that have adequate support in place to host students who identify as LGBTQ+. If you're looking for districts that can support your prospective LGBTQ+ outbound students, write to [youthexchange@rotary.org](mailto:youthexchange@rotary.org).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more ideas, information, and considerations for students going abroad, including LGBTQ+ students considering exchange, the short list of resources below may be helpful. Please note that these resources are only intended as suggestions to provide useful information and are not endorsed by RI, nor should they be considered an exhaustive list of resources. Please click on the links listed below.

- **Human Rights Watch**
- **Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA)**  
**Unpacked: A study abroad guide for students like me**
- **IES Abroad**  
**Country-Specific Diversity Resources**
- **International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) Sexual Orientation Laws Maps**
- **NAFSA: Association of International Educators — Rainbow Special Interest Group**
- **OutRight Action International**

# TERMS

The following list of terms can help make conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity more comfortable. This list is by no means comprehensive, and we hope it will encourage you to learn more about terms used in your language and culture to help foster inclusive, caring, and respectful communication between your volunteers and students and their families.

**Ally** — A person who does not identify as LGBTQ+ but shows support for LGBTQ+ people and promotes equality in a variety of ways.

**Asexual** — The lack of a sexual attraction for other people.

**Bisexual** — A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

**Cisgender** — A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

**Closeted** — Describes an LGBTQ+ person who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Coming out** — The process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts, and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.

**Gay** — A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to members of the same gender.

**Gender identity** — One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither — how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**Homophobia** — The fear and hatred of or discomfort with people who are attracted to members of the same sex.

**Lesbian** — A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women.

**Pansexual** — Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree.

**Plus / "+"** in LGBTQ+ — An inclusive addition to the traditional or frequently used abbreviation LGBTQ to include other sexual orientations, gender identities, or allies, such as intersex, asexual, questioning, or others.

**Queer** — A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations. Often used interchangeably with LGBTQ.

**Sexual orientation** — An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.

**Transgender** — An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

*Terms adapted from those defined by **The Human Rights Campaign** (U.S.).*



## Together we can make a difference

Valuing differences, embracing a variety of perspectives, and ensuring equitable opportunities for students in Rotary not only creates an environment where students and their families feel welcome, but it provides young people incredible opportunities for learning and growth. As leaders for Rotary's youth programs, your commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is critical to developing young people into leaders who can serve as catalysts for peace and understanding in a world facing increasingly complex challenges. By making these fundamental principles a priority of your programs you have a chance inspire others, including students themselves, to see diversity as a source of strength and enrichment — in their local communities and throughout the world.

Thank you for the support you provide to Rotary's young people, and for your efforts to help create a more open, inclusive, and fair organization that benefits us all.